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AUTHOR Dalton, Jon C.
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ABSTRACT

Common problems of establishing independence, making friends, and mastering a new environment draw college students together and create a strong social cohesion which has considerable influence on students' attitudes and values. In many institutions the peer culture is estranged from the academic life of the campus. If student affairs professionals want to have a significant impact on the values of college students they must be able to influence the peer culture. In order to influence the peer culture it is necessary to understand the culture by conducting research on the students and by systematically using data from such research. Student culture must be clearly established as a domain for student development intervention by making formal connections among the curriculum, teaching, and student life. Finally, student affairs professionals must identify and confront those value issues in the peer culture which conflict with educational objectives and have the greatest impact on students' moral development. Important areas to consider include: (1) alcohol and drug education; (2) sexuality; (3) academic integrity; (4) racism and sexism; and (5) volunteerism. Student affairs staff need to be more active in promoting opportunities for students to serve others, combat harmful elements in their environment, and work for noble ideas and causes. (NB)

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THE INFLUENCE OF PEER CULTURE ON COLLEGE STUDENT VALUES

By Jon C. Dalton

Northern Illinois University

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

The fact that college peer culture influences students' values is, of course, nothing new. The literature about college life has always recognized the importance of student culture and the influence of student peers in the college setting. Newcomb's (1966) review of 50 years of research on college students clearly documented the fact that peer culture has always been an important influence on students in the college setting in America. When college students need help, seek support and advice, they have always looked first to their peers.

One of the reasons why peer group influence is so strong is that college students are most likely to develop close relationships with those who share common interests in a common environment. New college students face problems of establishing independence, making new friends, and trying to master a complicated and threatening new environment. These common problems draw students together and create a strong social cohesion which has considerable influence on students' attitudes and values.

Lawrence Kohlberg's (1971) research indicates that most college students are in the conventional stage of moral thinking and very dependent upon the opinions and values of their peers. Right and wrong are defined largely in terms of prevailing norms and values. William Perry (1968) claims that because of the cognitive dualism of most new college students, the peer group provides an important confirmation of values. With parents no longer around, the uncertainties students confront in the moral realm can be very unsettling.

The point at which students are most influenced by the peer culture is during the freshman year. Nevitt Sanford (1964) describes what he calls the "freshman personality." Freshmen are typically away from home for the first time, insecure about the college setting, and still somewhat authoritarian and inflexible in their beliefs and values. They are very vulnerable to others'

appraisals and tend to look to the peer group for definition and measurement of themselves. The peer group can make or break one's self confidence. As Sanford argues, "Freshmen are usually very conformist. They are ready to work hard, to conform with what they take to be the pervading standards of behavior . . . ." (Sanford, p.108)

Robert Pace's (1979) College Impress Model identifies several aspects of the college environment which make a significant impression on students. He identifies peer groups as one of the most influential components of the college environmental "press." He argues that peer group contacts are an important part of the learning environment of the college and are influential factors in promoting students' learning and development.

In short, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that the values college student develop are strongly influenced by the extent and intensity of their involvement with the college peer culture and the values which are prized in that culture.

Changes in Collegiate Peer Culture

In the 1960s, Clark and Trow (1966) developed a very helpful social typology to describe the subcultures in the college peer culture. They identified four peer culture "types" consisting of academic, athletic, non-conformist, and vocational. This typology was widely used in defining the four major value and lifestyle orientations found in college peer culture at that time. The typology has some useful applications in understanding contemporary college peer culture.

Ernest Boyer (1987) argues in his new study College: The Undergraduate Experience that a narrow vocationalism, which has strong emphasis on skills training dominates the campus. Students today value most those aspects of the collegiate experience that serve to enhance their vocational objectives. One

of the results of this vocationalism, Boyer claims, is a great separation, sometimes to the point of isolation, between academic and social life on campus. Students approach the college experience with a pragmatism that values only what is useful from a career perspective.

When Clark and Trow conducted their studies in the 60s, it was possible to describe college peer culture as largely a campus-based phenomenon with a largely homogeneous student population. The student culture was primarily a creation of colleges and the activities, traditions, and values uniquely which grew up around the college campus. Even though the collegiate peer culture was often irrelevant and anti-intellectual, it was clearly dependent upon the college for its symbols and activities. That is not the case with the vocational peer culture.

What is unique about peer culture today is the extent to which it is divorced from the academic community. As T. M. Newcomb (1966) argues, "The domain of peer group influence overlaps but little with the domain of the intellect." (p.144) As the size and diversity of colleges increased and as mass media grew in its impact on college students, the characteristics of collegiate peer culture changed significantly. Today, the peer culture of college students exists largely outside the academic community. This is particularly so in large institutions. As Joseph Katz (1981) notes, the classroom, which could be one important means of bringing students together, is almost universally reported not to be the place in which students get to know each other. To most faculty and staff, the peer culture is invisible. It is possible to see certain outward signs and symbols of the peer culture in such things as dress, behavior, and language but mostly the influence of peer culture is internal to students.

Students respond to the college environment with perceptions shaped largely by the peer culture. The peer culture shapes the psychological habitat of students and influences what students "see" in their environment and how they see it. This is one reason why it is difficult for non-students to understand the college peer culture merely by observing its outward signs. One has to be a part of that psychological habitat in order to fully comprehend the meaning of the behaviors and rituals of college peer culture. Because the peer culture is largely invisible to outsiders, student affairs staff and faculty are likely to overlook its influence or underestimate its impact.

Norms of Contemporary Peer Culture

If it is true that the peer culture operates outside the academic community, what is its source of norms and how do these norms relate to the goals of student development? Many observers of college peer culture today argue that the norms of collegiate peer culture come, not from the college, but largely from the external media. When one considers the amount of time most college students spend with the mass media it is no surprise that the media, especially television, is a primary source of values for them.

What kinds of norms and values are promoted in the entertainment media today? In Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah (1985) describes the influence of mass media in the following manner: "The television world is relentlessly upbeat, clean, and materialistic . . . with few exceptions prime time gives us people preoccupied with personal ambition. (It) conveys the idea that human aspiration for liberty, pleasure, accomplishment, and status can be fulfilled in the realm of consumption. The relentless background hum of prime time is the packaged good life." (p.279)

Alexander Astin's (1985) longitudinal data on the characteristics of entering college students documents their increasing materialism and self-interest. Astin depicts a student culture in which the dominant characteristics are desire for self-fulfillment, self-enhancement, and financial security. Students are more career-oriented, more grade-conscious, more accepting of authority, more geared to high-paying, high-status jobs. Nationwide, more than one-quarter of all high school students going on to college say they want to major in business.

College students today are more oriented to immediate gratification, to a student culture in which alcohol is now almost universally used, to sexual conduct liberalized, if not liberated, from traditional norms. Last year the number of freshmen who described themselves as political conservatives reached an all-time high. As Jon Miller (1986) writes in his report on the American college student, "In short, these data portray a generation that is most unlikely to foster a revolution, but they would surely make the trains run on time." (p.5)

At the same time, the intellectual culture hesitates to say anything serious about the larger issues of existence. The college peer culture is particularly influential today because its values are not strongly nor consistently confronted in the academic environment. The "meism" of college students goes largely unchallenged. Colleges and universities have moved away from the liberal ideal of character education and, instead, offer specialized discrete bodies of information or useful skills tailored for particular careers. The liberal arts are weak, faculty-student contact has declined, concern for research has promoted specialization and fragmentation in the academic community, the curriculum in most colleges and universities has shifted to accommodate more vocational and professional preparation courses,

and the sheer size and complexity of the large institutions where most students are educated tend to fragment the size of the community. The result is a fractured culture of separation and isolation for the students.

Consequently, in many institutions the peer culture is estranged from the academic life of the campus. The values which are promoted in the peer culture exist along side and often in conflict with the values associated with the academic mission of the university. In any head-to-head conflict of values, it is usually clear which are the more dominant. When it comes to values the peer culture can usually trump anything promoted by the college. Considerable lip service is paid to values in the academic mission of most colleges but too seldom are intentional educational interventions designed to promote values development.

It seems clear, therefore, that if student affairs professionals want to have a significant impact upon the values of college students they must somehow be able to influence the peer culture. This is dangerous business. Is it really possible to influence the peer culture? The challenge for us is to be able to influence the peer culture so that it will contribute to the educational objectives and value outcomes of the college. How can we do this?

Strategies for Influencing Peer Culture

1. Understand the peer culture. More time and expertise must be invested in understanding the peer culture of our students. One of the obvious criticisms that can be made of most student affairs organizations is that they do not devote sufficient time to research and study on the students they serve. Even when the data is readily available, it is seldom systematically used.

There is considerable data available about college student characteristics which can help us to understand college peer culture. Much of the

longitudinal data now available is gathered from high school students before they enter college. It cannot tell us what is unique and distinctive about peer culture in the college setting. We need to be able to isolate the special impact, if any, which college peer culture has upon the characteristics which students possess when they enter our institutions. How can this be done?

Peter Garland (1985) writes in his excellent monograph, Serving More Than Students that student affairs staff must become experts on students, their expectation, needs, interests, and abilities. We are generally looked to as "experts" on students and have strong credibility in this area but often our expertise is not based on systematic studies, assessments and evaluation. We cannot understand what is going on in the peer culture merely through casual observations or anecdotal approaches. There is an abundance of base data available from national sources which can be supplemented very cheaply with institutional research.

In addition to understanding student attitudes and perceptions about college life, another important strategy for understanding the college peer culture is to study how students spend their time. Astin (1985) argues in his recent book on Achieving Educational Excellence that an important indicator of educational and personal development is involvement. Look at where students put their physical and psychological energy, their vigilance, their efforts, and you will have an important measure of what they are learning.

2. Clearly establish student culture as a domain for student development intervention. To a large extent colleges, especially the larger ones, have abandoned the student culture as a formal target of educational impact. We are not suggesting some wholesale return to in locus parentis even if it were possible, but we must be more intentional in making formal connections

between the curriculum, teaching, and student life. Clearly, Astin's primary argument in his Involvement in Learning report is that higher education cannot maximize its educational impact if it does not effectively make these connections. College peer culture is far too important to permit it to be shaped largely by influences external to the university.

3. Identify and confront those value issues in the peer culture which conflict with educational objectives and have the greatest impact on students' moral development. There are several issues which are central to the college peer culture and absolutely essential to the values promoted in college student development. They represent points of leverage or "fault lines" where we can maximize our impact. The following are some important areas of leverage.

a. Alcohol and Drug Education

The first point of leverage is alcohol and drug education. The data on entering students indicate that alcohol is now almost universally used and when one links it with health problems, vandalism, acquaintance rape, racial conflicts, accident and injury, it represents one of the most serious student problems.

Student affairs staff have been long committed to dealing with alcohol and drug education and have been very effective in some areas. Some may argue that efforts in alcohol education have not reduced drinking levels; however, the overall impact has been very positive. Colleges now have "dry rush" on campus, students routinely serve alternative beverages and food at social functions, student affairs staff are more sensitive about advertising alcohol, they have less problems managing

large student parties, and there is greater concern among students about safety, especially drunk driving.

Alcohol use is at the heart of peer culture, probably the single most important rite of passage for youth in our society, and the centerpiece of most college social group activities. It represents, we believe, one of the pivotal areas where we can influence college peer culture.

b. Sexuality

A second important point of leverage in the college peer culture is sexuality. The college peer culture condones and often promotes some values and behaviors with regard to sexuality that run directly counter to the goals of student development -- especially the values of respecting other people and taking responsibility for self and others. Studies (Miller and Marshall, 1986; Struckman-Johnson, 1986) indicate that a significant number of college women (almost half in some studies) have been physically coerced into sex. At the same time a great many men feel under psychological pressure to force sex.

The problem of sexually-transmitted diseases is also one of the most serious yet understated problems on campus. Data from the American College Health Association indicate that it is the number one health problem confronting college students today. It is estimated that almost 20% of college student have chlamydia infections or other STDs. Couple these problems with the growing alarm about AIDS and one has a set

of concerns that cannot be ignored by student affairs professionals.

c. Academic Integrity

A third point of leverage is with academic integrity. For a student population which sees college as the primary access to lucrative careers and social status, grades are all-important. Grades are the gateway to dreams. Grades determine the winners and losers.

Academic integrity is a core value in college life, perhaps the single most important value in the academic community. Without it, scholarship is impossible and the learning enterprise is compromised. Too often colleges do little to promote this important value and to educate students, especially new students, to the importance of integrity in the academic setting.

d. Racism and Sexism

A fourth point of leverage with the peer culture is in the area of racism and sexism. For all its diversity and freedom of lifestyle, college student culture can be very racially segregated and sexist. The problem of racial bias is raising its ugly head again on campus. Minority enrollment is declining in colleges and universities. Even those minorities who matriculate in higher education have far greater attrition rates than their non-minority counterparts. Obviously, there are many answers to this complex problem but few would argue that discrimination and prejudice in society as well as on campus continue to be a major factor. The data on student

values and attitudes indicate a decreasing concern about social problems and race relations. It is the flip side of the strong vocationalism and materialism reflected among today's college students. It is hard to be concerned with making society better when students are so focussed on making things better for themselves. It should be obvious to anyone who looks closely at the problems of recruitment, retention, and graduation of minorities that we are looking at one of the most important trend issues for higher education for the coming decade.

The college peer culture does not promote appreciation of differences and racial and sexual equality. On the contrary, college peer culture promotes racial separation and inequality. One can hardly find a more segregated environment than campus fraternities and sororities. There are few groups with more sexist attitudes than college freshmen males. Almost half of them believe that the place of women is in the home. So it is important for student affairs staff to be intentional about promoting values of human rights and social justice if we want the educational environment to have a positive influence on the development of students.

e. Volunteerism

A fifth point of leverage is volunteerism. Much of the research on moral reasoning development indicates that the experience of empathy or role-taking can be a powerful influence in promoting moral development. Robert Selman (1976) confirms the important role of social perspective-taking in

character development. Sprinthall and Mosher (1975) argue that being able to take the perspective of others is a necessary pre-condition for moral development. Unless college students can learn to empathize with other people and gain an appreciation of their specific thoughts, feelings and ways of viewing the world, they will be isolated in their own subjectivity. One of the best ways to promote this awareness is through volunteerism. Helping out with big brothers or big sisters, spending time in a retirement home, giving a few hours a month to tutor a child, organizing a blood drive, all these can be important experiences which help to add social-perspective while strengthening community.

Erik Erikson (1968) wrote that youth is the most ideological time in life. It is a time for causes, for great achievements, and the instincts are there for tackling great social issues. Student affairs staff need to be more active in promoting more opportunities for students to serve others, to participate in combating what is evil and hurtful around them, to actively work for noble ideas and causes. There is no better time to be doing this than during the college years. There is no better way to have an influence on value awareness and development in college students.

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